When our symbols slip, reflections on dementia

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There are certain changes in a person, often small at first, almost too subtle to notice, that begin to rearrange the familiar contours of their mind. A misplaced word, a forgotten task, a momentary confusion about time or place. We tend to react to these slips with concern because they seem to signal something drifting out of reach, but we rarely reflect on what exactly we believe is being lost. Forgetfulness appears frightening not only because a memory is gone but because it disturbs our quiet assumption that memory is the substance of who we are. We live in a culture where the symbolic self, our stories, identities, names, and roles, carries the entire weight of our personhood. When cracks appear in that structure, it feels as though the person themself is leaking away.

On deeper inspection, maybe the situation is more complicated, and also more spacious, than this interpretation allows. When forgetfulness enters the mind, it may be less a sign of collapse than a reminder that our symbolic layer is fragile by nature. It drifts, fades, and requires constant reinforcement from the world around us. Language does not stay with us on its own; it is kept with us through our families, our routines, and our culture that continually echoes back the words we have learned to inhabit. Dementia does not simply break something inside a person; it reveals how much of our self we take for granted and how much is dependent on symbols that no longer function in the same way.

To say this is not to diminish the real losses that accompany dementia. There are losses, and they matter deeply to the person and to those who love them, but when we assume that what is being lost is the person in their entirety, we are misreading what is unfolding. Dementia shows us that the self is larger, more layered, and more resilient than the symbolic structure that dominates our understanding.

As dementia develops, our symbolic layer loosens first. Names slip, narratives thin, and our sense of continuity across time begins to blur. These changes can be frightening because they disrupt the way we are used to recognizing one another, but if we look carefully, another

pattern begins to appear. Beneath the symbolic layer lies a quieter stratum of personhood. An embodied, relational, and perceptual intelligence that is usually overshadowed by language. This layer does not vanish when words do; it becomes more visible.

People continue to respond to tone long after they stop responding to content. They recognize safety and threat even when they cannot explain why. They move toward familiar rhythms and away from sensory chaos. They follow embodied memory, walking, humming, folding, and touching, long after declarative memory has frayed. There is a way of being present that does not depend on words or a stable narrative. Dementia shifts a person into that mode more fully.

This shift can be difficult for loved ones because the symbolic layer is the one through which we are accustomed to communicating. We rely on conversation to confirm connection and on shared memories to confirm relationship. When that channel begins to fade, it is easy to feel as if the relationship itself is dissolving, but perhaps the connection is not gone. Perhaps it is now being expressed differently. Dementia does not remove the desire for companionship or the capacity for attachment. It changes the way those needs and capacities show themselves.

Our challenge, then, is less about deciphering dementia and more about expanding our understanding of human presence. Our symbolic self is only one part of who we are as a person, and when it falls away, other parts may step forward. Parts that communicate without words, recognize without names, and relate without narratives. A person may no longer recount their life story, but they still react to gentle touch, familiar music, and predictable routines. These responses are not vestiges of who they were; they are expressions of who they still are.

This reframing may help us understand why certain behaviors arise in dementia that appear confusing or distressing at first glance. Wandering, for example, might not be a sign of aimlessness but a form of searching for environmental harmony. Repetitive actions may be attempts to create rhythm and orientation, when one’s sense of time slips away. Silence might be the mind retreating from symbolic overload into embodied presence. What looks

like “behavioral disturbance” through our symbolic lens may be meaningful responses within different perceptual modes.

Viewed this way, dementia is not the sudden disappearance of contact with reality but a shift in how reality is encountered. Words lose their grip; sensory and affective cues take their place. The environment becomes either overwhelming or grounding depending on its clarity, pace, and predictability. A loud, fast, symbol-rich world becomes difficult to parse; a quiet, rhythmic, simplified environment becomes nurturing. This is not because the person has regressed into something childlike or primitive, but because the tools for navigating symbolic complexity are no longer available.

If we accept that dementia involves not only loss but transition, the ethical implications shift. The task is no longer to drag the person back into symbolic life, as if the restoration of narrative continuity were the only form of dignity available. Instead, the task becomes meeting them where they are by learning how to communicate through tone, touch, rhythm, gesture, and environmental structure. This requires us to loosen our own attachment to our symbolic identity and develop a different form of presence.

For many caregivers, this shift happens intuitively. They slow their speech, soften their expression, reduce demands, and begin interacting in ways that feel more like sharing presence than exchanging information. They might not describe what they are doing in the way I have, but they are instinctively adapting to the person’s current mode of being. The relational bond persists, even if it is no longer mediated by story.

Still, this adaptation can be painful. When someone we love stops recognizing us by name, it is natural to feel erased, but names are only one form of recognition. A person may no longer retrieve the label “daughter,” yet still lean toward that daughter’s voice, relax into her embrace, and feel soothed by her presence. This kind of recognition is not symbolic; it is embodied and affective. It is just as real, though our culture rarely acknowledges it as meaningful.

Our difficulty lies in the collision between two worlds, the world of symbolic expectation and the world of embodied presence. Dementia exposes the dominance of the symbolic world by stripping it away, and what rises in the absence of symbols is not emptiness but a different

kind of being, one our culture does not have much practice seeing. When this mode of being is not recognized, the person is treated as though they are no longer there, even though they are expressing themselves in forms that remain available.

Dementia care is not merely a clinical challenge but a cultural one. It asks whether we are willing to broaden our definition of personhood. It asks whether we can learn to value subtler forms of presence that persist when language fades. It asks whether we can accompany someone into a territory where our usual markers of identity have disappeared but our need for connection remains intact.

If we approach dementia as a shift rather than an annihilation, care begins to change. We stop correcting and start attuning. We reduce complexity and increase pattern. We emphasize the steady rhythms of daily life, not because they will restore symbolic functioning but because they provide a ground for experience. We listen with our bodies as much as our ears. We let silence become a shared space rather than an absence. Most importantly, we build environments that feel navigable without the need for constant verbal interpretation.

There is a tenderness in this approach, not sentimental but attentive. It invites a slower way of being with another person. It teaches us to drop the reflexive habit of asking, “Do you remember?” and instead ask, “Are you comfortable? Are you safe? Are you at ease?” Or better yet, it invites us to stop asking questions all together and notice their quiet signals. The softening of their shoulders, the turn of their head toward or away from a sound, the relaxation that comes with familiar touch. It opens a space in which connection can take forms we did not expect.

Perhaps dementia also teaches something about the nature of our own minds. Our symbolic layer feels stable while we inhabit it, but dementia reveals how dependent it is on context, memory, and shared cultural narratives. When those supports weaken, our symbolic layer dissolves. Yet our person remains, present in gesture, breath, movement, desire, fear, and longing. If we see this clearly, it may change how we view ourselves long before dementia enters the picture. It may help us recognize that our deepest continuity does not depend solely on the stories we tell about ourselves.

In the end, dementia might invite a more spacious understanding of the human condition. It might encourage us to meet one another with fewer demands and more curiosity. It might ask us to consider that personhood is not housed exclusively in memory but is distributed across the ways we orient, respond, and relate. It might teach us that there is still someone there, even when the symbolic surface has worn thin.

To accompany someone through dementia is to learn a different language, one spoken not with words but with presence. It is a language of patience, rhythm, and touch. It is a language that honors the person who remains, not by insisting on who they were, but by attending to who they are now. This is what care ultimately requires. Not the preservation of identity as it was, but the recognition that identity continues to express itself, quietly and unmistakably, in the ways a person reaches for the world when their symbols have fallen away.

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